

Bacteria Back Away Beachgoers

By KEITH L. MARTIN

Microscopic bacteria put a damper on the plans of beachgoers hoping to start the Fourth of July weekend early, as the Board of Health closed two local beaches on Thursday.

Swimming was prohibited at the Shipyard Lane and Landing Road beaches due to high bacteria counts from Thursday morning until noon on Friday. According to Health Agent Jennifer Dalrymple, runoff from rain on Monday was most likely

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Visitors to Shipyard Lane and Landing Road beaches were greeted by signs like this Thursday prohibiting swimming due to high bacteria levels in the water. The beaches reopened on Friday.

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the cause, as it carried pollutants from nearby roads and other structures directly to the water.

"This occurs when we have heavy rains [like Monday] and test the day after," she said.

Three years ago, the state enforced strict federal standards for beach water quality monitoring and the Massachusetts Beach Act requires testing at all public beaches at least once a week.

The beaches are ordered closed if the amount of the bacteria called Enterococci exceeds 104 colony forming units per 100ml. Enterococcus has proven to be the most useful bacterial indicator for fecal contaminant in marine waters.

According to the tests performed on June 29, the waters off Landing Road had a level of 120 while at Shipyard Lane, the count was 160. Dalrymple said that levels were fine for the other three testing sites in town: Blakeman's / Bath House (10), the first beach crossover (4) and the west end of the beach (69).

New tests conducted Thursday afternoon and released Friday showed a bacteria count of 13 at Shipyard Lane and a count of 84 on Landing Road.

This is not the first time bacteria levels have been high in these waters in recent months, confirmed Dalrymple, but it is the first time this summer the Board of Health has prohibited water activity. Tests conducted on June 1 showed bacteria counts of 330 at Landing Road and 565 at the west end of the beach. These were both after storm events, said Dalrymple, and no closures were posted as swimming activity was low at this time of year.

Shipyard Lane beach was closed due to high bacteria amounts last August and Dalrymple said that this was the first time since testing for bacteria that Landing Road beach has been closed for high levels of Enterococci.

Dalrymple added that Enterococci are not necessarily harmful alone, as they are found in the intestine of many warm-blooded animals. Their presence suggests that other harmful organisms and viruses also in the intestine of warm-blooded animals, including humans, may be present. She said that if organisms are accidentally

ingested while swimming, they could cause a variety of diseases with the most common being mild gastroenteritis with flu-like symptoms.

"You'd have to swallow a lot of water and bacteria to exhibit the flu-like symptoms, but we close the beaches as a precaution," she said. "It's better to be safe."

While tides and currents in open waters disperse contaminants, the level of bacteria is generally reduced within 24 hours. Unfortunately, said Dalrymple, the lab analysis of the water doesn't give instantaneous results and there is a 24-hour incubation period for all samples.

Those visiting the beaches on Thursday were largely unaware of the ban on swimming, as they did not see the 8"x11" signs posted near the entrances to the water.

One woman who wished to remain anonymous showed up at Shipyard Lane beach with her three children and was about to head into the water before being told of the closure. Saying she was "grossed out," the woman packed up her kids and left the beach, indicating that she hadn't seen the sign when she pulled up.

Another woman encountered on Landing Road beach said she too did not see the sign but decided to stay on the sand far from the water as a precaution.

Residents with any questions concerning water quality at swimming beaches should call the Board of Health at 934-1105. There is also a link on the board's website called "Beach Testing Results" where residents can see if a beach is closed and view the latest bacteria testing amounts.